

The President's Daily Brief

9 April 1969

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10 April 1969

LATE NOTES FOR THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF OF
9 APRIL 1969

I. MAJOR PROBLEMS

SOVIET AFFAIRS

Students in Prague intend to strike soon over the recent restrictions on the press, and they are trying to drum up support in the trade unions. The Dubcek leadership is trying to calm the situation, but its influence with the students has declined in the wake of its recent efforts to meet Soviet requirements for "normalization."

The leadership is also worried about discipline and morale in the Czechoslovak armed forces, in part because the Soviets have expressed concern on the subject. President Svoboda has visited four military posts in the last week.

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There is nothing significant to report in the Middle East, Europe, or Vietnam.

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II. OTHER IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

CANADA - COMMUNIST CHINA

Peking has agreed to "full-scale negotiations" with
Canada about recognition, according to press reporting from
Ottawa. [REDACTED]

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NIGERIA

Another 500 tons of arms for Biafra [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] are to arrive in Gabon by ship next
week, [REDACTED]

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I. MAJOR PROBLEMS

VIETNAM

The Communists appear to be off balance as a result of recent South Vietnamese initiatives on the peace issue, particularly President Thieu's statement to the National Assembly on 7 April. Communist responses continue to be highly defensive and notable for their failure to provide straight answers to direct questions about whether they are rejecting Saigon's proposals or refusing categorically to negotiate with GVN authorities under any circumstances.

This ambiguity was particularly evident in the Liberation Front's "special" news conference held in Paris yesterday. It was a highly inept affair and left newsmen puzzling over why it was called at all. The Front spokesman claimed he "had something to say," but his responses to questions about recent South Vietnamese statements consisted solely of tired clichés and epithets.

In view of the care the Vietnamese Communists normally take in expressing their positions, their failure specifically to reject Thieu's offer is significant. That the Communists are not closing the door on further contacts, and eventually even negotiations, with GVN representatives appears obvious. Indeed their ambiguous and clumsy responses may be intended to give this impression. In our view, however, their reactions so far seem to reflect mainly the difficulties they are

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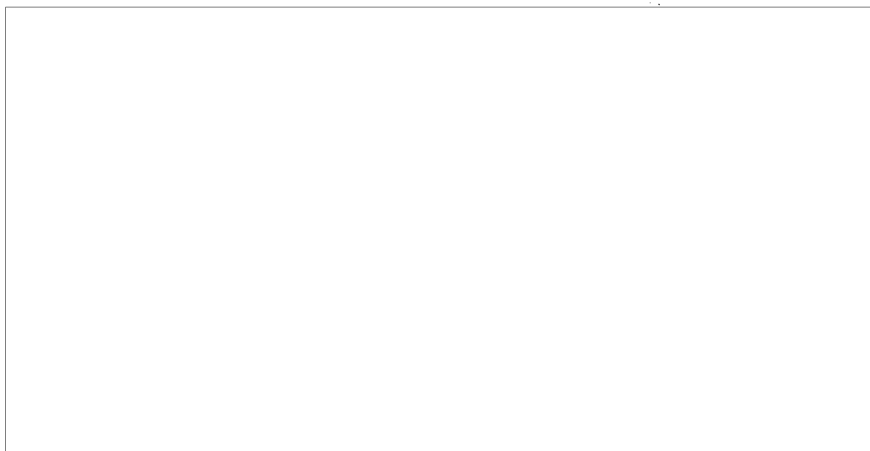
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having in coming to grips with Saigon's more confident and forthcoming stance concerning a future political settlement.

We still think the Communists will not soon respond positively to South Vietnamese feelers for private contacts. They probably calculate that given enough time, the US desire for progress in Paris will prompt Washington to take new initiatives to set up private talks in the kind of four-way format they seem to want.

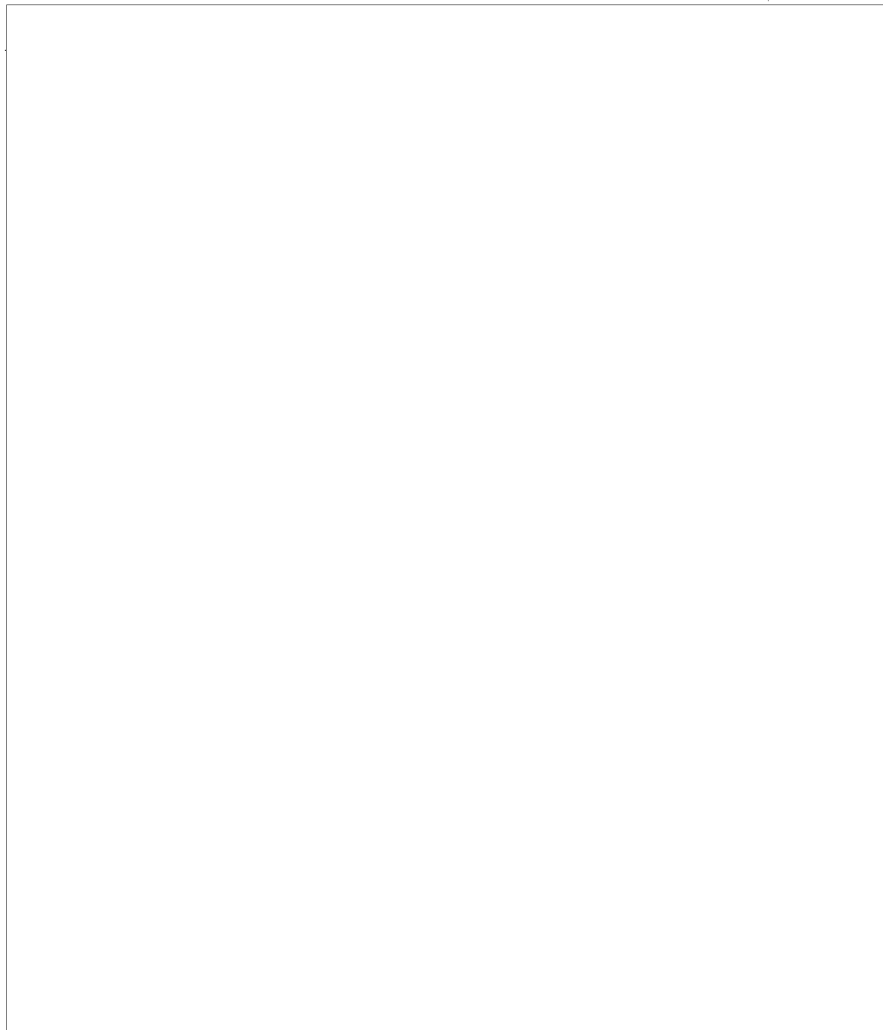
Although we do not expect the Communists to agree to private meetings with the GVN at this point, we would not rule out some overtures from the French or Soviets on behalf of the Vietnamese Communists aimed at breaking the ice in Paris. Hanoi may well consider the post-offensive period a suitable time for such an indirect initiative. It might, for example, take the form of another Soviet "we-have-reason-to-believe" statement suggesting the direction in which we should move next if we want to see negotiations move ahead.

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EUROPE

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[redacted]
[redacted] international agreement on plac-
ing voluntary limits on certain textile exports [redacted]

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[redacted] Bonn has confirmed to a US Embassy of-
ficial Germany's dislike for such an agreement, although

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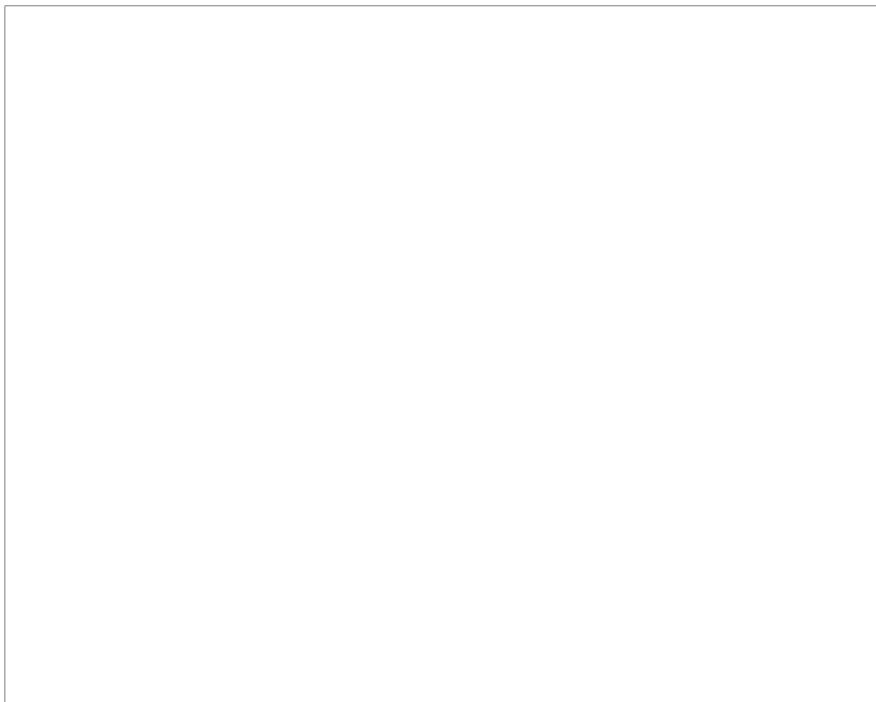
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he said the Germans would listen to the US case. The officials of the Community are setting up their positions because they expect Secretary Stans to bring up the question on his forthcoming European trip.

Apart from the textiles issue, the Europeans welcome the Stans visit as an opportunity to discuss protectionist trends on both sides of the Atlantic, and the Community countries may be interested in setting up some kind of new machinery to resolve trade issues between the US and the Common Market.

SOVIET AFFAIRS

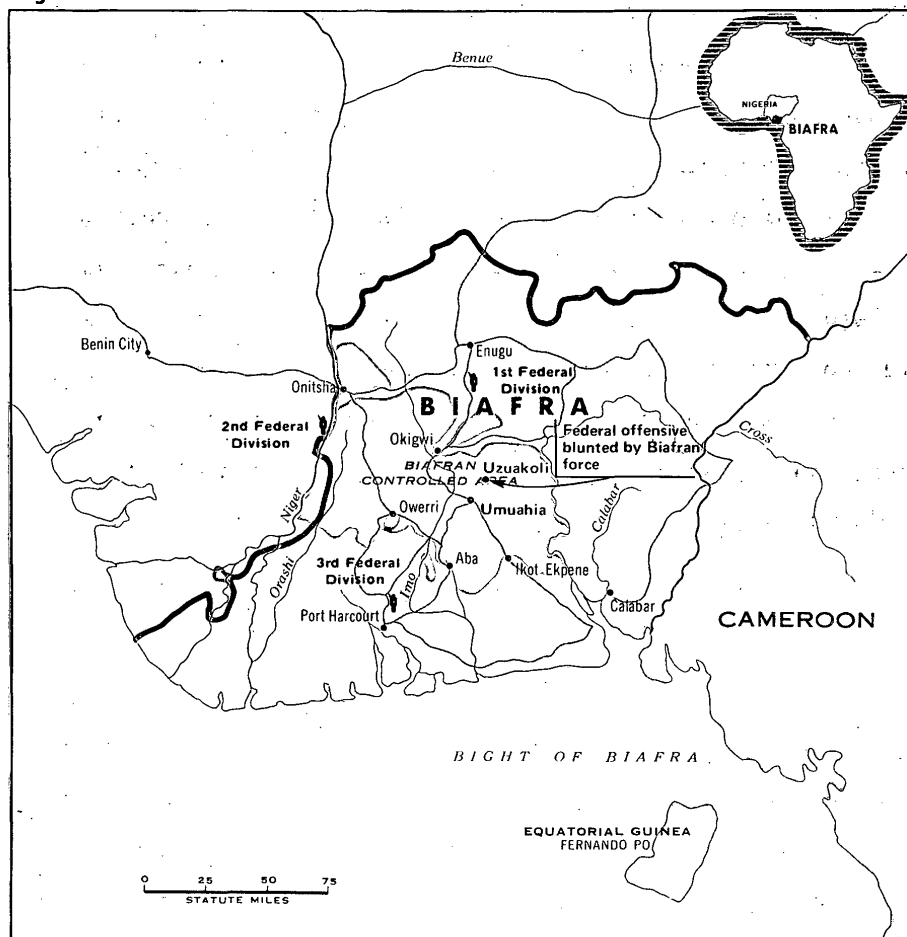
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MIDDLE EAST

There is nothing significant to report.

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NIGERIA

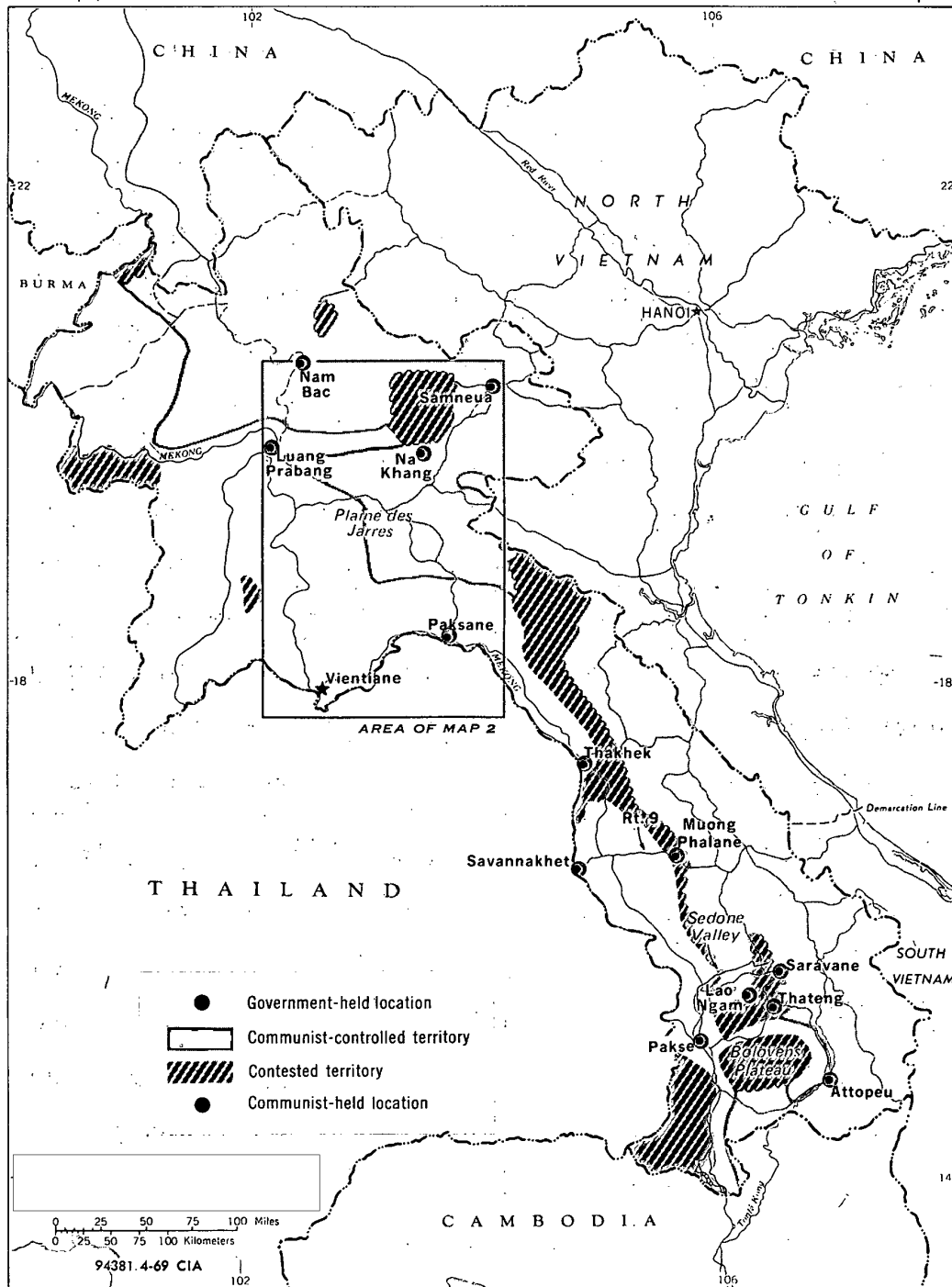
Federal spokesmen have been claiming their forces are getting close to Ojukwu's capital at Umuahia, but Biafran military intercepts indicate that the federal drive has in fact been blunted. Biafran forces apparently still occupy the key junction of Uzuakoli and are counterattacking a few miles north of the town. Nor is the federal offensive producing any gains elsewhere on the Biafran perimeter.

Lagos apparently genuinely believes the Biafrans have lost Uzuakoli--it has invited a group of foreign correspondents to visit the town--and the disappointment when the truth comes out will add to the undercurrent of unhappiness with Gowon's government. (MAP)

LAOS

At Annex we discuss the Communist military threat and the role of Laos in Hanoi's over-all negotiating strategy.

Map 1



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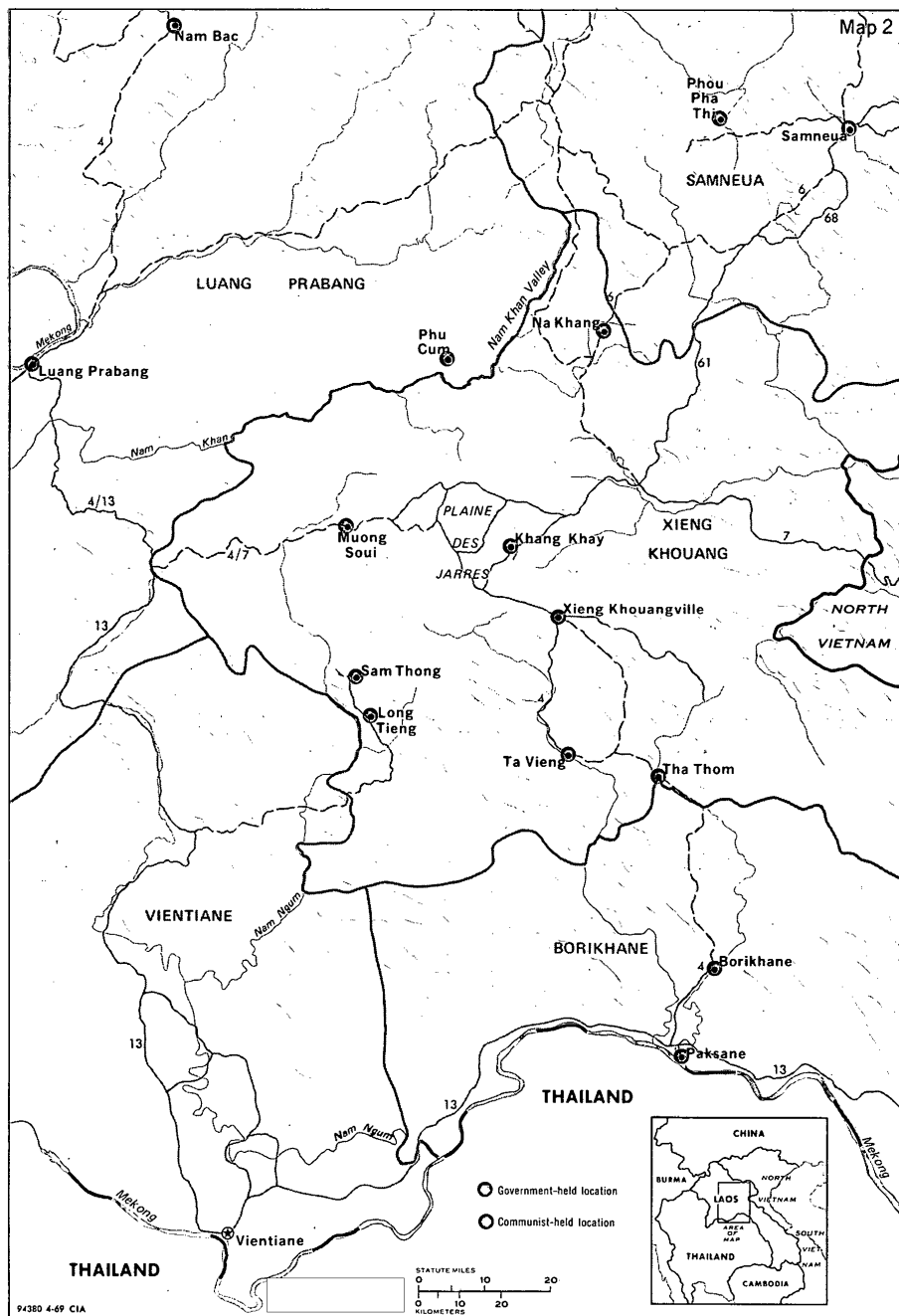
THE CURRENT COMMUNIST THREAT IN LAOS

Recent fighting in Laos has once again surfaced the specter of a Communist military victory there and has raised questions about North Vietnamese aims in that country. The North Vietnamese position is that the problem of Laos will have to be settled apart from the talks on Vietnam. We might expect the Communists to take as much additional territory as possible prior to reopening talks on Laos. On close inspection, however, it seems reasonably clear that the current offensive has only limited objectives and probably does not presage an impending Communist call for renewed negotiations.

By most objective criteria, the dry season offensive mounted by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces this year has been notably restrained. Except for some not unexpected--although still dangerous--inroads in the north, the Communists have gained no substantial new territory, brought no great numbers of new people under their control, captured no important political or population centers, nor otherwise significantly improved their tactical or strategic position in the countryside. This year's dry season operations, at least through the first week of April, have been carefully modulated, unadventurous, and essentially defensive in nature.

A comparison with last year's dry season offensive might help put the current situation in sharper relief. Last year at Nam Bac, the enemy dealt government forces the worst defeat of the war, putting out of action close

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to 3,000 troops, capturing vast stocks of arms and ammunition, burying government pretensions in north-central and northwest Laos, and, finally, precipitating a crisis of confidence in Vientiane that has not yet run its course.

In the northeast, where much of the enemy's activities have been centered this year, the Communists captured the guerrilla base at Phou Pha Thi, demonstrating the vulnerability of any government position no matter how "impregnable," [REDACTED]

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By early March, government guerrillas in Samneua and Xieng Khouang provinces were in full retreat, an attack against Na Khang [REDACTED] was thought to be imminent [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] and nothing--or so

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it seemed at the time--stood in the way of a clean Communist sweep.

Farther south, the Communists pushed government forces out of Ta Vieng and Tha Thom and moved downward along Route 4, harassing the provincial capital of Borikhane and raising a new threat to the Mekong River town of Paksane. To the east, the enemy moved against a number of guerrilla bases defending the approaches to Meo leader Vang Pao's headquarters at Sam Thong. In the panhandle, North Vietnamese troops moved out of the infiltration corridor and captured, for the first time, the town of Muong Phalane situated on Route 9. More importantly, fresh North Vietnamese battalions surrounded the provincial capitals of Saravane and Attapeu, pushed the government out of the rice-rich Sedone Valley, attacked

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and eventually occupied Lao Ngam, and all but sealed off the strategic Bolovens Plateau. To do their work, the Communists are estimated to have brought in as many as 12 additional battalions from North Vietnam.

In contrast to last year's formidable roll call, the Communists this year have captured only one major government base--Na Khang--and have brought heavy pressure to bear on only one strategic government position--Thateng. They also have increased harassing attacks against irregular forces in northwest Laos, and have taken a number of preliminary steps to move back into Vientiane Province, from which they were driven several years ago. But on the whole the Communists' drive has fallen considerably short of last year's threshold. There is, in short, not only sufficient reason to query why the Communists have not pursued last year's gains with more vigor, but also reason to question whether there has actually been a full "offensive" this year.

What, then, is the basis of the alarmist statements that have been made by government leaders in Vientiane, the sense of foreboding that engulfs the capital? In part, the situation reflects disappointment that the Paris talks have not made more progress and that the end of the fighting in Laos, after all of these years of conflict, is still not in sight. Deep down the answer lies in the Laotian psychology--the expectation that each Communist blow may be the beginning of the end.

The fact remains, nevertheless, that the North Vietnamese could, with assets already on hand and with little

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or no warning, move to the Mekong, overrun major political and population centers and, in short order, bring Souvanna Phouma's government to heel. That North Vietnam has refrained from moving in this direction over the past seven years is a reflection of the fact that as long as portions of Laotian territory contiguous to Vietnam are in Communist hands, and as long as the struggle for South Vietnam continues, what happens in Laos is of secondary importance.

Hanoi has been reluctant to press for a military solution in Laos, in part because it cannot predict what the US response might be, and in part because a military move that seriously jeopardized Souvanna's government would of necessity also be of such a character as to appear to the world to be a clear case of aggression against a "neutral" country. A move of that nature in Laos would tend to undermine Hanoi's political posture in the South Vietnam struggle and would probably alienate some of the international sympathy and support that the Communists clearly covet.

Despite these limitations on its freedom of action, North Vietnam plays from an extremely strong hand in Laos, and is in a position to up the ante any time it chooses. If the Communists want to precipitate a full-blown crisis in Laos--either with the intention of pushing Souvanna into an unfavorable settlement or of exercising some leverage on the US in Paris--there are a number of pressure points where they can do so at

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relatively little military cost. It would probably take a dramatic turn of events in South Vietnam to force the Communists' hand, but Hanoi retains the option of playing its trump cards in Laos whenever it sees fit.

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